

The Symbolic of Woman in the Illustrations in Codex Manesse Collections of Middle High German songs from Chinese Perspective

Weina Xu¹, Lei Duan²

School of Fine Arts, Changchun University, China¹, Jilin Animation Institute, China²

Email: xuwn79@ccu.edu.cn¹, 51825706@qq.com²

To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i7/17381>

DOI:10.6007/IJARBSS/v13-i7/17381

Published Date: 18 July 2023

Abstract

This research examined the figure of the ladies of ministerial knights in the 'Herr Wernher von Teufen', 'Konrad von Altstetten' and 'Von Wissenlo' illustrations. The 'Konrad von Altstetten' also known as Courtly Love and the other illustrations of the Codex Manesse are an excellent representation of our conception of mediaeval life and culture. From a universe of miniature illustrations, three were chosen based on the following criteria such as vestments of ministerial knights and images with both male and female figures. As this research observed the body gesture of woman depicted in Codex Manesse, based on our findings, we were able to piece together the social structure of Europe in the thirteenth century. Literary scholars appear to have paid less attention to the portrayal of woman in the Codex Manesse illustrations from other cultural perspectives. The paper investigates the meanings that woman attributed to specific symbolism and explores fundamental questions; (1) What roles of woman were played by texts, images and rituals in the maintenance of, and challenges to, the political order?, (2) What In order to determine the sociocultural significance of this activity and the female figure is examined in relation to contemporary materials socio-culture. This paper analyses a selection of late-medieval illuminations in which woman play a significant role in order to offer light on the images' focus with body and script and the efforts to illustrate norms and concerns around lover and their responsibilities.

Keywords: Codex Manesse, Illustration, Woman Figure, Medieval Culture, Women in Art

Introduction

The Codex Manesse is a collection of Middle High German love songs (minnesang) written by a diverse group of songwriters known as Minnesangers. The word 'love' (minne) in High German refers to a couple, while 'love song' (minnelied) refers to a single piece of romantic music (Mohr, 2018). Among the songwriters were kings, queens, prominent aristocrats, and regular folks. These devotional miniatures provide contemplative sites that encourage the reader's imaginative participation in the story, thereby transforming the act of reading into a

rich and interactive experience (DeChant, 2023). Recent discussions and analytical insights have radically shifted how this theme is perceived, allowing for the integration of viewpoints that were not present to its early proponents in the middle of the twentieth century. This paper places more emphasis on the visuals than the textual parts of the poem since they provide insights into the lives of women at the time of the poem's production through gestures, body language, and a few references.

DeChant (2023) analyses a full page symbolic portrait of Minnesingers of Herr Pfeffel. This small poet stands on the bank of a river and reels in a fish while a courtly woman seated nearby reflects delight. DeChant (2023) identifies a productive mindset in the art history method used to examine imagery in contemporary psalters. The illustration also used to capture the social order of the thirteenth century based on the miniature illustrations found in Codex Manesse collections. However, there are differences of religion and spirituality in Eastern and Western. Individually crafted collections of prayers for nuns, monks, and laypeople began to play a big role in mediaeval culture and devotion, and exhibition catalogues have played a vital role in the development of literary, historical, and codicological studies of mediaeval prayerbooks and prayer. European mediaeval cultures were focused with the obstacles of long-distance communication, that required on both the written word and the human figure to retain, convey, and relay information (Stock, 2012). Both historical texts and popular narratives of the time, like as epics and romances, extensively addressed the subject of messengers and their relationship to the people they were communicating with. When it comes to politically relevant communication, mediaeval culture places an emphasis on both the simultaneous presence of bodies and the representation of absent persons.

In the ongoing discourse on courtly love, interactions between knights and ladies take the form of an art governed by intricate rules that must first be mastered. The majority of the collections are exquisitely demonstrated to the audience with a glance of German book illustration techniques from the 13th to the 15th centuries. Several of the most significant Middle Ages works are on display, including Wolfram von Eschenbach's *"Parzival"*. For instance, numerous texts and images indicate that a significant attitude shift had occurred. A knight seems to be no longer happy with merely possessing the woman who caught his eye. He intended to win her heart. The advent of this multi-voiced, idealistic approach to love altered not only relations between the sexes, but also aristocratic identity and courtly society's conduct of business. Poems and images in the Codex Manesse represent and exemplify this radical shift in mediaeval societal values.

Codex Manesse Illustrations

The Codex Manesse associates couriers with the conveyance of love; the character of the messenger provides sustenance for the hope of intimacy and the great victory of distance in this culture of distant love (Stock, 2012). The illuminations are indicative of a courtly society that places a high priority on communication.

Its exquisite miniatures depict an idealised version of the lifestyle that knights aspired to live. Count Kraft von Toggenburg III approaches his lady in a tower in an act of courtly love. In courtly love, the knight promised to serve his lady just as a vassal assured to continue serving the king (National Geographic, 2022). Seebass (1988) indicated that the Lady music represents the seven gesticulating women the illuminator does not transgress the boundaries of the subject of the conductus. The woman in an elegant dress symbolical of learnedness and ready to be bound to idea approaching reality (Seebass, 1988).

Manuscript illustration of a loving couple with the man holding a falcon and woman carrying a falcon on her arm and riding side saddle in Figure 1. A passion for falconry, regardless of a person's gender, was considered an inherent trait of noble descent (Gourlay, 1997). The illustration of a couple holding a falcon is frequently a covert symbol for sexual relations because falconry was such an important aspect of courtly life, it was also associated with courtly love. In this image, however, Gourlay (1997) indicates that the woman is holding the hawk while Wernher von Teufen embraces her with affection. This represents the woman the dominant position in the relationship and may indicate that she was either a person of higher status or the hunter with the poet as her prey (Gourlay, 1997).



Figure 1. *Herr Wernher von Teufen*, cpg 848, fol. 69r. Source: Heidelberg University Library (2023)

In the Courtly love Illustration in the Middle Ages (1310-1340) as shown in Figure 2 indicate that 'Courtly Love' meant cherishing one's true love with respect, candour, and courtesy (Wilkins, 2021). In this illustration shows that the top part of the ambient lighting displays the shield and helmet of Konrad. The knight returned from hawking, rests in the lap of his lady. The breathtakingly affectionate scene demonstrates the beautiful blonde long hair damsel reclining in the arms of his beloved. Wilkins (2021) indicate that as a symbol of their blossoming romance when they have seemed to be in a garden surrounded by the rolling branches of a rose bearing both blooms and buds. The illustration depicts a woman affectionately embracing her partner. The illustration would therefore convey the message of love and protection from the male partner, with the female rider portraying the woman being embraced (Standley, 2008). Moreover, the female comforting the male partner in their arms was a strong symbol that represented feeling safe and the warmth, less physical gap as well as closer emotionally in trusted bond.

However, another similar illustration from Heidelberg University Library (2023) is depicted in the miniature of *Herr Konrad von Altstetten* in the Codex Manesse of Zurich where a knight with helmet performs with two women to the aristocratic violist's music. The dancers accompanied by Amant, the goddess of love, are organised similarly to the Zurich mural, with men and women alternating and their hands elevated to shoulder height (Shalev-Eyni, 2008). The rose bush above Konrad as shown in Figure 2, according to the University of Iowa library, is meant to be 'sprouting from his loins' like the 'Tree of Jesse', a symbolic of Christian heritage

and seemingly a popular motif in Medieval art (Mohr, 2018). Roses bush can be seen in few Codex Manesse illustrations and around the 1200s and 1300s, it was a popular choice in Europe. Roses are widely seen as a symbol of luxury and an extravagant way to convey individual's feelings (Touw, 1982). Roses can be seen as subjects for horticulture and perfumery as well as their religious symbolism among Christian and it is significant to present in the illustrations. The importance to represent roses in the illustrations because of their value in horticulture, perfumes, and Christian religious symbolism.



Figure 2. *Konrad von Altstetten*, cpg 848, fol. 249r. Source: Heidelberg University Library (2023)

The individual features of woman depicted the respect and the intrinsic values to celebrate the achievements. On the one hand, the scenario may have evoked memories of a loved one and provided a feeling of security, as well as it would have indicated to admirers and others the person's love commitment (Standley, 2008). However, this may give vague gestures, that it may have been misunderstood, as it may have been both a flirty form of communication and a symbol conveying affection, protection, and limits that should not be violated. The female figure reflects different persons, religions, social levels and views involved in the Codex Manesse illustrations. The female in the Codex Manesse illustrations highlighted the symbol of status and affection.



Figure 3. *Von Wissenlo*, cpg 848, fol. 299r. Source: Heidelberg University Library (2023)

Figure 3 shows a man gently pushes the little figure towards the woman, and the woman gently receives him. This clearly illustrates the unique interpersonal setting in this illumination, however it does not solve the question of why there is a little character 'personifying' or 'being' the medium (or the content) of a discussion when it might have been represented just as well without him. Stock (2012) indicated that this illustration partially explained by Frühmorgen-use Voss's of a metaphorical personification concept where in reality, it serves to draw attention to the peculiar physical and 'personal' side. Furthermore, more significantly, the woman seems to think that this image casually illustrates the contradictions of modern love culture, with its contrasting themes of proximity and separation, closeness and communication. The illustration depicts a moment when the man and woman are 'next to each other', and the child who represents both the body and the face that is so identical to the man's.

Symbolic and Meaning of Female

Love was a way of acting and an universal ideal, not just a set of emotions or a private experience. The purpose of this aristocratic kind of self-presentation was to elevate the social status of its participants by highlighting their moral superiority and elevating their sense of worth (Jaeger, 1999). The lover holds the beloved in the highest regard, viewing them as a guiding light and source of moral uplift. The attractiveness of the beloved's physical form is the primary reason for the lover's desire for physical 'union' with her (Barrack, 2013). This female figure symbolises that she honoured by her powers than her beauty.

The tournament, festival, knighting ceremony, and courtly love were all products of Europe's courtly culture throughout the Middle Ages, which is considered one of its greatest accomplishments. However, it's remarkable that sexuality historians have disregarded courtly love (Schultz, 2006). Courtly love, according to Schultz (2006), was sparked by extrinsic indicators of class rather than the biological and inner reasons that are so prevalent in our modern conceptions of sexuality, such as sex differences or desire: bodies that were obviously noble and actions that exemplified courtliness. They sought not only for physical union, as depicted, but also for the social difference that comes with fully realising these positions. To an exceptional level, 'Courtly love' was a metaphor for the admiration of courtliness itself, the eroticization of nobility, and the appreciation of the refined and refined culture that surrounded it. However, the understanding of kingship, the content include the idea of females to homiletic literature and iconography of the virgin martyrs in the later middle ages (Goldberg & Ridy, 2004).

Additionally, medievalists were under pressure to adapt, rather than adopt, modern and postmodern theories of gender and their relationships with race and social class because mediaeval civilization was so different from the current era (Caviness, 2010). The exegetes' imaginations and creativity were stimulated by the poem's complete acrostic and the characteristics of the feminine figure portrayed. The relationship between man and woman on the topic of form and subject certainly had a significant influence on the both exegetical style and gender perspectives (Alfonso, 2011). Moreover, according to Alfonso (2011), wise and beauty of woman portrayed in the considered a part of a broader wider literary phenomena that shown in countless examples in modern Arabic and Romance literature. Furthermore, Shaner (2018) stated that 'matters of life and death have become simple games for an idle moment' as it contradicted to genuine love and real war' in the "*Courtly Love*" illustration. The majority of illustrations portray some sort of touching, yet it is unusual for two human figures to be depicted touching each other. This aligns with the prevalent

language of distant love, which focuses almost exclusively on long-distance relationships (Stock, 2012). Romances have a lot of interpretive possibilities and the ability to challenge dominant socio-political ideas (Shaner, 2018).

Woman and Social Structure

As anticipated, woman play just a supporting part in the story of the conflict. Female characters are typically only mentioned when they are crucial to the plot or serve as a contrast to the male protagonist (Jeep, 2001). This narrative technique is reflected in the representation of women, which further diminishes the audience's understanding of the value of women in society. Poets in much secular mediaeval literature explore the erotically and sexually bound but also economic, political, religious, and social relationship between the women and men, disregarding the cases in which violence interrupts the free exchange and develops a terrible imbalance, usually to the disadvantage of the female victim (Classen, 2018).

Classen (2018) indicate that in many mediaeval poets emphasised, either formally or informally, that adapting to some or all of those qualities could result in the desire for personal pleasure but it does not provide the sufficient context for this phenomenon, but it does have narrative elements that highlighting to the strong roles played by female characters. Authors of courtly romances and late mediaeval verse narratives often portray their female protagonists as strong and independent, pursuing their own aims and values in their own unique ways. Additionally, devotional and 'high' love adorns the hearts of heroic Germans, but the poem's tone focus on unrequited love show the emotion also indicates physical desire (Warren, 2020).

From Chinese Perspective

Western and Chinese artists interpret the world in their paintings in various ways. Western and Eastern artists typically represent the visual world from various perspectives, both in a geometric and a metaphorical way (Bao et al., 2016). It is interesting to emphasize that the difference between landscape and people preferences in Western paintings was greater than in Chinese paintings. The aesthetic principles of Chinese paintings is profoundly influenced by Taoist concepts that emphasise the peaceful connection between humans and the cosmos (Law, 2011). From the Chinese perspective, the European Medieval art is real form from the actual observation. It is significant that the women represented in the illustrations were viewed differently. The physical form or beauty indicates the social change towards equality as well as inclusion. The women in the poems and photos in the Codex Manesse viewed in different interpretations where some illustrations for instance, showed that a standard image of man and a woman embraced each other with arms and legs. This can be interpreted in different context that the couple having joy and sweetness.

Ambiguity, was discovered to be a crucial factor in aesthetic appraisal; nevertheless, cultural differences influenced this relationship because Westerners prefer to perceive awe and nostalgia positively (Hitsuwari & Nomura, 2022). The illustrations could be interpreted to support the idea that woman is characterised as legendary and empowered figure whereas medieval songs reflect humour in affectionate courtship. The illustration portrays of a man as being in love with a beautiful peasant girl. However it is significant to reflect the value of woman's contribution in the overall setting, the context and all of the potential outcomes interpreted of the illustrations (Dickason, 2016).

There is social difference where courtly knight projected a most sophisticated appearance and exposed his body language of closeness to his woman. Identifying sexuality in the illustrations support specific power structures, ultimately specifically gender and relationship. Full-page miniatures featuring the writers' portraits and settings from royal life are included with the Manesse Codex songs and these miniatures have some religious inspiration (Shalev-Eyni, 2005). Moreover, the image of Christ the lover-knight increased to wide popularity from the late twelfth century onward, when concepts of an emotional connection between man and God in the redemption were fully developed.

Following the migration of paper from China to Europe, these religions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Neoconfucianism, Islam, Humanism, Protestantism and types of knowledge entered new phases. From this perspective, paper played an even more decisive role in world cultural history than Gutenberg's printing technique (Nawata, 2020). The illustrations demonstrated viewers experiences either positive or negative emotional reactions. The experiences, enthusiasms makes broaden and deepens their interpretation connects the tangible form of the object to its intangible dimensions, symbols, meanings, inherent and social values facilitating customized personal heritage experiences.

In the nine-century, women and men communicated and shared about and acted upon a number of similar problems and experiences. More of this kind of information is needed in order to shed light on the gender dynamics of pre-modern Germany and, more generally, on the lives of women, which have been historically shrouded in darkness (Jeep, 2001). It is entirely plausible that family relations reflect similarly structured hierarchical paradigms in the secular and religious institutions. Men are described in terms of their expected behaviour toward women of a certain status. In this Middle age, women seen as helpful travel guide and discussed and even addressed as objects of sexual desire.

Conclusions

Understanding contemporary socio-political power structures and female gender roles requires a thorough examination of systematic, gendered power dynamics and disadvantages for women in mediaeval times. In Codex Manesse literatures, the woman portrayed the gender politics and represent female characters of romance within royals, famous rulers, nobleman and commoners.

There is significant contributions where the illustrations provide a visual representation of how the European Middle Ages are seen all throughout the world. It is important to keep in mind that our understanding of the past shapes how current researchers or people interpret the present while shaping the future. There are several insights to be gained about perseverance, originality, and the pursuit of equality from the representation and achievements of women in the 17th century. Moreover, women represented powerful, self-reliant women who influenced a change in cultural norms as well as shift societal attitudes and expectations. Furthermore, this unique gloss by a reader and writer of Old High German provides proof of regular use of a highly uncommon type of ninth, tenth, and eleventh century manuscript containing exclusively Old High German texts. This paper shows that various viewpoints given in traditional Chinese and Western paintings are perceived differently by Chinese and Westerners, demonstrating a cultural similarities and differences in aesthetic preferences. This indicate that it is the way how painters depict the world visualisation influences on how viewers interpret the paintings.

References

- Alfonso, E. (2011). Medieval portrayals of the ideal woman. *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, 3, 131–148.
- Bao, Y., Yang, T., Lin, X., Fang, Y., Wang, Y., Pöppel, E., & Lei, Q. (2016). Aesthetic preferences for Eastern and Western traditional visual art: Identity matters. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7(OCT), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01596>
- Barrack, C. M. (2013). Motifs of Love in the Courtly Love Lyric of Moslem Spain and Hohenstaufen Germany. *Monatshefte*, 105, 173–200.
- Caviness, M. H. (2010). Feminism, Gender studies, and Medieval Studies. *Diogenes*, 57, 30–45.
- Classen, A. (2018). Quidditas The Agency of Wives in High Medieval German Courtly Romances and Late Medieval Verse Narratives : From Hartmann von Aue to Heinrich Kaufringer. *Quidditas*, 39(3). <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol39/iss1/3>
- DeChant, D. L. (2023). Fishing for Meaning: Immersive Reading and the Codex Manesse Frontispieces. In G. Allaire & J. Human (Eds.), *Courtly pastimes (Ser. Routledge medieval casebooks)*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003306672>
- Dickason, K. (2016). Medieval songs reflect humor in amorous courtships, Stanford scholar finds. *Stanford: Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*.
- Goldberg, P. J. P., & Riddy, F. J. (2004). *Youth in the Middle Ages*.
- Gourlay, K. E. (1997). La Dame à la Licorne: A Reinterpretation. *Feminae: Medieval Women and Gender Index*, 130, 47–72.
- HeidelbergUniversityLibrary. (2023). *Heidelberg historic literature – digitized*. Heidelberg University Library. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.2222#0517>
- Hitsuwari, J., & Nomura, M. (2022). Ambiguity and beauty: Japanese-German cross-cultural comparisons on aesthetic evaluation of haiku poetry. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, No Pagination Specified-No Pagination Specified. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000497>
- Jaeger, C. S. (1999). *Ennobling Love: In Search of a Lost Sensibility*. University of Pennsylvania Press. <https://doi.org/doi:10.9783/97808122200621>
- Jeep, J. M. (2001). The Roles of Women in Old High German Literature. *Mediavistik*, 14(1), 95–123. https://doi.org/10.3726/83994_95
- Law, S. S. (2011). Being in Traditional Chinese Landscape Painting. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, 32(4), 369–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2011.584615>
- Mohr, T. (2018). *What is the Manesse Codex? Fenix Forgeries*.
- NationalGeographic. (2022). *The Codex Manesse*. National Geographic. <https://www.nationalgeographic.co.uk/photography/2022/04/the-codex-manesse?image=knights10>
- Nawata, Y. (2020). Towards a Global History of Culture 1 . *Jahrbuch Für Internationale Germanistik*, 51(1), 135–146. https://doi.org/10.3726/ja511_135
- Schultz, J. A. (2006). *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality*.
- Seebass, T. (1988). Lady Music and Her “Proteges” from Musical Allegory to Musicians’ Portraits. *Musica Disciplina*, 42, 23–61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20532316>
- Shalev-Eyni, S. (2005). Iconography of love: Illustrations of bride and bridegroom in Ashkenazi prayerbooks of the thirteenth and fourteenth century. *Studies in Iconography*, 26, 27–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23923658>
- Shalev-Eyni, S. (2008). Humor and Criticism: Christian-Secular and Jewish Art of the Fourteenth Century. *Zeitschrift Für Kunstgeschichte*, 71(2), 188–206.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40379333>

Shaner, M. E. (2018). *“Wommanly Noblesse:” Female Gender Dynamics in Medieval Romance*. The University of Texas at El Paso.

Standley, E. (2008). Ladies hunting: A late medieval decorated mirror case from shapwick, somerset. *The Antiquaries Journal*, 88, 198–206.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003581500001396>

Stock, M. (2012). Letter, word, and good messengers: Towards an archaeology of remote communication. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 37(4), 299–313.
<https://doi.org/10.1179/0308018812Z.000000000024>

Touw, M. (1982). Roses in the Middle Ages. *Economic Botany*, 36(1), 71–83.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4254352>

Warren, A. W. (2020). *Heinrich Heine and the German Middle Ages* by [University of Toronto].
https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/103533/1/Warren_Andrew_William_202011_PhD_thesis.pdf

Wilkins, C. (2021). *10 works of art to celebrate love on Valentine’s Day*. Charlotte Wilkins.